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ABSTRACT

Based on research indicating successful readers have several common characteristics (student choice and availability of reading materials, time for reading, and time to talk about their reading), a study explored research findings about each characteristic and surveyed middle grade teachers' reading practices in the classroom. Seventh-grade students (n=124) in a small southeastern city and seven of their teachers were surveyed concerning student reading. Results indicated: (1) excluding textbook assignments, the majority of boys surveyed do not read and do not enjoy reading; (2) teachers and parents encourage students to read, but fewer than half are engaged in reading to boys; (3) teachers do not provide a time for personal sustained silent reading during the school day; (4) middle grade boys do not read unless required by their teachers; and (5) assigned reading materials are not the reading materials preferred by middle grade boys. (Contains 7 tables of data and 21 references.) (NKA)

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Middle Grade Boys: Reading Habits and Preferences for a New Millennium

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Middle Grade Boys: Reading Habits and Preferences for a New Millennium

A middle school in rural Virginia held a contest to determine the student in each homeroom who checked out the most books throughout the school year. Adam's mother was surprised when he won second place in his class. She leaned over and told me, "He may have checked out 72 books, but I know he didn't read them" (B. Louhoff, personal communication, May 6,1999). The moral of the story? Simply checking a book out of the library does not make a student a reader.

There are a number of studies concerning middle grade students' reading such as the reading preferences of middle grade readers (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999; Worthy, Turner, & Moorman, 1998; Worthy 1998; Tonjes, 1991), the availability of preferred reading materials (Worthy, Turner, & Moorman, 1999; Worthy, 1998; Tonjes, 1991), and motivation of middle grade readers (Hicks, 1997; Mizelle, 1997; Gambrell, 1996). However, there seems to be little research directed at the *male* middle grade reader. In addition, the fact that middle grade boys are behind middle grade girls in reading ability (NAEP 1998, NAEP 1996) seems to be accepted as a consequence of their being born male. Why is there seemingly so little concern about the reading abilities of middle grade males? Numerous studies have been conducted and continue to be conducted, which examine the development of reading skills in the early elementary years. While there is not a question of the importance of this research, it seems that the reading abilities of middle grade students, males in particular, have been overlooked. Thus, this research is to discover what educators can do to help middle grade boys read more and hopefully achieve more reading success.

Review of the Literature

The 1998 NAEP report found that "at all grades and for all levels, the reading performance of female students exceeded that of their male peers" (NAEP, 1998, p. 66). Trelease (1989) notes that boys make up over 70 percent of remedial reading classes in the United States. Some educators point to biological differences between the sexes as an explanation of these statistics. Trelease is unwilling to accept this theory and notes that remedial reading classes in other countries are divided equally between boys and girls (p. xxiii).

Do American educators expect boys' reading abilities to be less than girls'? Do they unconsciously contribute to this lack of ability by accepting this as a natural part of the development of boys? Palardy (1998) conducted research that concludes that teacher expectation does influence student achievement. Palardy also asserts that boys are less successful in beginning literacy instruction than girls because their teachers believe they will be less successful. He believes when this is communicated to students, the academic potential of boys is stilted. Palardy questions what the possible cumulative effects on males who have consecutive years of teachers who believe that they will be less successful in early literacy than female students (p. 184-185).

William Purkey at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro conducted a study of 400 North Carolina students in grades 6 through 8 to find out how they perceived themselves as students. The report found that "boys have a much lower image of themselves as students than girls do" (Bushweller, 1995, p. 10). Brozo and Schmelzer (1997) discuss the literacy behavior of boys, in particular, possible connections between

male identity and literacy attitudes and achievement (p.5). They concluded that choice of reading materials was important in helping boys develop a positive masculine self-image.

In order to determine why boys are behind girls in reading, it is necessary to determine what research says are the characteristics of good readers, and then compare those characteristics to boys' reading practices. Research (Melton & Pickett, 1997; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999; Worthy, 1998; Ivey, 1999; Avery & Avery, 1994) indicates that successful readers have several characteristics in common: student choice of reading materials; availability of reading materials; time for reading; and time to talk about what they read. For this research project, a discussion of research findings concerning each characteristic will follow with a survey of middle grade boys reading habits and preferences as well as a survey of middle grade teachers reading practices in the classroom. Finally, the researcher will discuss survey results in light of the information presented in the review of the literature.

Student Choice of Reading Materials

Student choice of reading materials has been found to play a significant role in the development of reading skills and abilities. "Students who are allowed to select their own material, then given a chance to read silently for a period each day, develop reading skills more quickly than those who are given only assigned reading" (Melton & Pickett, 1997, p.25). Worthy (1998) list student choice among the top suggestions for teachers who wish to see an improvement in time spent for reading enjoyment (p.514). Tonjes (1991) notes that readers greatly prize the control they maintain over their own reading (p.44). In addition to control, research indicates that "middle-graders were eager to read

if given interesting, high-quality reading materials" (Humphrey, Lipsitz, McGovern, & Wasser, 1997, p. 307). Avery and Avery (1994) assert that "regular readers of comic books, magazines, and newspapers are developing a level of comfort with the printed word; because learning to read for enjoyment is a path to more critical reading, almost any kind of reading matter is appropriate for hooking kids on books" (p.58). Therefore, they recommend investing in the genres that are popular with students: "fantasy, science fiction, biographies of famous people, westerns, mysteries, sports stories, and true survival and adventure stories" (p.58).

In a survey by Worthy, Moorman, & Turner (1999) the top five preferences of reading materials for adolescent boys included scary books, sports magazines, car and truck magazines, and comics (p.20-21). Cunningham, Cunningham, & Arthur (1981) conclude that children who are allowed to read series books and comics develop the habit of reading (p. 15). "Given the importance of students' personal preferences, out-of-school reading interests ought to be welcomed into the classroom and integrated into the reading curriculum. The strong influence of self-selection on motivation to read makes a good cause for free-choice reading, especially for struggling middle school readers" (Ivey, 1999, p.378). "Emphasis needs to be placed on using literature of students' choice at the core of the literacy program, and or designing learning opportunities that promote relevant and real-world learning experiences for students" (Hosking & Teberg, 1998, p. 336). Thus, the importance of self-selected reading materials cannot be overstated. In order for students to develop into confident readers, they must be allowed to select reading materials that appeal to their interests.

Availability of Preferred Reading Materials

The next characteristic of good readers is that they have access to preferred reading materials. "Regardless of ability or general inclination to read, interesting materials are needed to develop and sustain engaged middle school readers" (Ivey, 1999, p. 374). A survey conducted by Worthy, Moorman, & Turner (1999), found that reading materials most preferred by students were often not available in school libraries. Furthermore, the failure of libraries to have preferred reading materials available may be most detrimental for reluctant readers. The survey also found that when preferred materials such as sports magazines, car and truck magazines, and teen magazines are available in libraries, they are not available for student checkout and are not necessarily the specific magazines students preferred. The conclusion of this study is that there is a growing gap between the materials schools provide students and the materials students want to read (p. 20-21).

Humphrey, Lipsitz, McGovern, & Wasser, (1997), report that "young people must have access to up-to-date, interesting reading materials if they are actively to engage as readers. Access to current, appealing, high-interest, and useful books and other reading materials in their classrooms, homes, public and school libraries, and other locations within the community," is a recommendation included in the Reading Bill of Rights for Indiana's Young Adolescents (p. 306). "Limited availability of preferred materials in school leaves students with three choices: reading something outside of their interests, obtaining their preferred materials themselves, or not reading at all. Students who cannot afford to buy their preferred materials are more dependent on school sources, and, thus, their choices are even more limited" (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999, p. 23).

Time to Read

The third characteristic of good readers is that they have time to read. According to Avery and Avery, (1994), "schools and classrooms that set aside time for reading send the message that reading is important" (p. 58). Wood (1998) states that "each day all students, regardless of ability level, should be given the opportunity to read the book of their choice. This free reading time may range from only ten minutes to as much as thirty minutes" (p.69-70). The "Reading Bill of Rights for Indiana's Young Adolescents," recognizes the need for time to read and proposes that there be a "dedicated time during the school day to read for a variety of purposes – for pleasure, information, and exploration" (Humphrey, Lipsitz, McGovern, & Wasser, 1997, p. 306). Carbo and Cole (1995) note that good readers spend a lot of time reading, yet, most American children spend very little time reading anything at all. They also recommend that students be encouraged to take books home to read and that specific, uninterrupted reading periods be set during the school day to allow students time to read (p. 64).

Reading to Students

In addition to having time to read, a fourth characteristic is that adults need to read to students. Trelease (1989) notes that the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children (p. 1-2). Carbo and Cole (1995) also found that "the simple act of reading aloud something we enjoy has always been one of the most powerful ways to interest children in reading. In addition, they recommend "having a variety of people, such as teachers,

authors, principals, parents, and older students, read to students often" (p. 63). Avery and Avery (1994) assert that teachers who read aloud, or have students do it, build clearer mental images of key passages and thus motivate interest in the material. When readers, like all good storytellers, use voice and body to captivate a listening audience, they make the printed page come alive (p. 58).

Time to Talk about their Reading

The fifth characteristic of good readers is that they enjoy talking about what they have read. "Students hear about popular books through the media and the recommendations of their peers. Teachers can take advantage of this word-of-mouth phenomenon by making time for book advertising through presentations, read-alouds, and informal book-sharing sessions (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999, p. 24). Worthy, (1998), notes that peer recommendations have become increasingly important to adolescents. Furthermore, Worthy recommends that in addition to allowing students to choose the books they read for class, teachers allow student's time to talk to their friends about what they like to read (p. 512-513). Carbo and Cole (1995) recommend that children should spend most of their reading time by reading, and then discussing what they have read. They suggest that students be encouraged to discuss their favorite books, characters, and events (p. 64). Avery and Avery (1994) suggest that students present book talks as a way to help other students find excitement in a book. Programs that encourage students to talk about a book with other students get quick feedback and immediate praise (p. 59). In addition, talking about what they have read influences reading ability. The Reading Report Card (1998) found that students who talked about

their reading activities with family or friends had higher average reading scores than students who did not talk about their reading activities. (NAEP, 1998, p. 5).

To determine if middle grade boys benefited from the five characteristics of good readers two surveys were designed and administered. One was for middle grade boys to determine their reading habits and preferences and the second survey for their teachers to discover what they were doing to cultivate good reading characteristics in middle grade boys.

Survey Instrument and Administration

The students who participated in the survey were seventh-grade students in a small southeastern United States city. Forty-six percent of the students in the school qualify for free lunch, indicating a low socio-economic background and high-risk, according to 1998 NAEP study on student eligibility for federally funded free/reduced-price lunch. Eligible students had lower average reading scores than students who were not eligible for the program (NAEP, 1998).

The seven teachers who participated in the survey taught the seventh-graders in the selected middle school. The teachers were all female with 2 to 22 years of teaching experience. The middle school is one of two middle schools in the school system with a 12 month schedule and was selected because the researcher could administer the survey and collect the data in a timely matter needed to complete the study.

The student survey consisted of 12 questions concerning students reading excluding textbook reading. Three questions were on how students obtained their

reading materials, four on students' reading habits, two about reading practices in the classroom, and three on reading preferences.

The teacher survey consisted of eight questions concerning students reading excluding textbook assignments. Two questions were on teachers reading practices in the classroom, two questions about literacy development, one question about student use of school library, one question about students' reading preferences, and one question about assigned reading materials.

The survey was administered to 124 seventh-grade students in a middle school. The students were brought to the school's cafeteria in one group where the researcher read the instructions to the entire group. After completing the surveys were collected and separated. Only the 64 male students' surveys were tallied for this study on male reading preferences and habits.

The teacher surveys were given to 8 seventh-grade teachers at the middle school. The teachers were asked to respond to the survey questions as they applied **to male students only**. To ensure anonymity, the teachers were given a self-addressed, stamped envelope to return the survey to the researcher. Seven teachers returned completed surveys.

Survey Results
Student Survey

Sixty-four seventh-grade male students were surveyed. The responses were tallied and the results follow.

Table 1: Student Reading Habits

Student Enjoys Reading:	**Yes**	**44%**	**No**	**56%**
Teacher Reads to Class Daily:	**Yes**	**44%**	**No**	**53%**
Parent Reads to Child:	**Yes**	**8%**	**No**	**86%**
Time for Silent Reading in Class:	**Yes**	**11%**	**No**	**86%**

The results of the survey reported in Table 1 show that over half (56%) of the middle grade boys surveyed do not enjoy reading. In addition, the majority of the boys surveyed reported that there is not time for silent personal less than half reading in class. Slightly less than half of male students reported that read to them, but male students overwhelmingly reported that parents do not read to them.

Table 2: Reading Materials

Number of Books Read Per Week				
None	**53%**	**One**	**40%**	
Who Encourages Student to Read				
Teachers	**75%**	**Parents**	**61%**	**Grandparents 23%**
Source of Reading Materials				
School Library	**53%**	**Public Library**	**17%**	
Check Books From School Library				
Monthly	**38%**	**Only when required**	**52%**	
Check Books From Public Library				
Monthly	**28%**	**Only when required**	**16%**	**Never 48%**

As shown in Table 2, over half of the students surveyed reported they do not read any books during the week, excluding textbooks. Furthermore, only forty percent reported reading one book per week. The survey also shows that teachers, parents, and grandparents encourage students to read. While the main source of reading materials for middle grade boys is the school library, the majority of the students surveyed only checked books from the school library when required by their teacher. Approximately half (48%) of the students surveyed never check books out of the public library.

Table 3: Reading Preferences

Rank	Type of Material	Percentage who read if available and had time to read
1	Scary Books	72%
2	Cartoons/Comics	69%
3	Books/Magazines about sports	65%
4	Drawing Books	64%
5	Books/Magazines about Cars/Trucks	56%
6	Young Adult Funny Novels	56%

Only types of reading materials preferred by more than half of the male students are listed in Table 3. It is obvious from these results that boys prefer scary books, cartoons/comics, sports and car/truck magazines and books, and young adult funny novels.

Teacher Survey

Teacher surveys were distributed to all seventh-grade teachers at the school. Seven of eight teachers responded. The results of the teacher survey follow.

Table 4

Reads to Class Daily	**Yes**	**71%**	**No**	**29%**
Time for Silent Reading Daily	**Yes**	**14%**	**No**	**85%**
Literacy Activities Used in Classroom and Effectiveness				
After School Tutors	**57%**		**Effectiveness**	**75%**
Adult Reading Volunteers	**29%**		**Effectiveness**	**50%**

Table 4 shows the majority of the teachers surveyed (71%) read to students daily, which is a very different report from what the students reported (Table 1). However, eighty-five percent of teachers reported that they do not have a time each day for sustained silent personal reading, which is almost identical to the 86% that male students reported (Table 1). Over half of the teachers surveyed reported using after school tutors to improve student literacy which appears to be more effective than those using adult reading volunteers.

Table 5

Students Check Books from School Library
Monthly 57% Never 0%
Greatest Literacy Need of Students
Number of At-Risk Students 71%
Importance of Parental Involvement to Literacy Development
Very Important 100%

Displayed in Table 5, seventy-one percent of teachers surveyed consider the number of at-risk students to be the greatest literacy need in the classroom. While teachers recognize that parental involvement is very important to literacy development, only one teacher (14%) reported using parent/student workshops in the past, and wrote a comment on the survey that the workshop experience was not beneficial.

Table 6: Students' Favorite Reading Materials

Rank	Type	Percentage
1	Scary Books	86%
2	Sports Books/Magazines	71%
3	Drawing Books	71%
4	Young Adult Adventure Novels	57%
5	Young Adult Funny Novels	57%
6	Cartoons and Comics	57%
7	Magazines about People	57%

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Table 7: Assigned Reading Materials

Rank	Type	Percentage
1	Young Adult Novels	83%
2	Young Adult Novels about things that happen to people	83%
3	Biography	67%
4	Poetry	50%
5	Encyclopedias	50%
6	Animal Books	50%

*One teacher responded that she taught Mathematics, therefore she did not assign reading material.

Teachers (Table 6) responded the same as their students (Table 3) in determining reading preferences. The teachers accurately rated scary books as boys' favored reading material. The teachers were also accurate in determining boys' reading preferences in the top six categories. However, the types of books teachers assign for reading (Table 7) are not necessarily the books boys prefer to read. For example, while teachers assign poetry books 50% of the time, this was not among the books boys reported as a preference. Both teachers (65%, Table 6) and boys (71%, Table 3) reported that male students enjoy sports books and magazines, but teachers did not report assigning sports books/magazines a high percentage.

Discussion

A reliability check of two questions from the student survey and two questions from the teacher survey showed reliability rating of 100%. Unfortunately, 85% of teachers (Table 4) and 86% of students (Table 1) reported that teachers are not giving students time to silent read in class for enjoyment. A wide discrepancy was noted when

71% of the teachers (Table 4) and only 44% of the students (Table 1) reported that teachers read orally to them daily.

Another discrepancy was 57% of teachers (Table 5) reported students making use of the school library monthly, while students reported using the school library 38% (Table 2) per month. While students report that they only check out a book out when required by the teacher 52% (Table 2) of the time, teachers say that students never check out a book for assigned reasons only (Table 5), which indicates teachers are unaware that students are checking out books only because they are required.

Conclusions

The survey results indicate the following conclusions:

1. Excluding textbook assignments, the majority of seventh-grade boys surveyed do not read and do not enjoy reading.
2. Teachers and parents encourage students to read, but fewer than half of teachers and parents in general, are not actively engaged in reading to boys.
3. Teachers do not provide a time for personal sustained silent reading during the school day.
4. Middle grade boys are not reading unless required by their teachers.
5. Assigned reading materials are not reading materials preferred by middle grade boys.

Implications of Study

This study was limited to seventh-grade male students in a city in southeastern United States, therefore, it may not be an indicator of all male students' reading preferences or habits. The study needs to be expanded to determine if these findings are global. Additionally, the study was limited to seven seventh-grade teachers, which is not a sufficient number to be representative of middle-grade teachers. Thus, extending this study is warranted to help alleviate the problem of middle grade males not reading to their potential.

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